



# Do We Want to Live in Romney's or Obama's World?

## Comparing the Presidential Candidates' Foreign Policy Proposals

Peter Juul      July 2012

This year's presidential election offers a stark choice between competing foreign policy visions.

On one hand, President Barack Obama has a track record of pragmatic and principled management of America's role in a changing world. While President Obama has not hesitated to use force to protect American interests and values, he has not rushed headlong into "go it alone" military engagements as the country did into Iraq in 2003. The Obama administration has sought to resolve or manage complex global problems from the ongoing global economic crisis to Iran's nuclear program by pressing allies, partners, and other important powers and stakeholders to shoulder their share of the responsibility for international stability rather than by relying on the United States to act on its own.

By contrast, former Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney espouses a "go it alone" foreign policy vision. He has articulated a more aggressive approach to the use of military force and given indications he would have continued the war in Iraq while not drawing down in Afghanistan. Gov. Romney has voiced a desire to return to the days of the Cold War, declaring Russia to be America's "number one geopolitical foe," while at the same time threatening a trade war with China. In all, Gov. Romney's stated foreign policy vision amounts to a return to the Bush-Cheney foreign policy of 2001 to 2005.

We examine the candidates' positions on key foreign policy issues in this brief.

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## Use of force

### Gov. Romney's position

Gov. Romney's rhetoric indicates he would be more willing to use large-scale force in a wider number of places than President Obama.

Gov. Romney's attacks on President Obama's Iran policy suggest a low threshold for the use of military force to stop its nuclear program. He says he would do more but only outlines steps already being taken against Iran, such as deploying aircraft carriers to the Persian Gulf and enhancing defense cooperation with Israel. Gov. Romney has stated that "of course you take military action" if all other options have failed,<sup>1</sup> and to him anything less than Iran completely halting its uranium enrichment is failure.<sup>2</sup> In addition, in 2010 Romney claimed that Iran was effectively "at war" with the United States.<sup>3</sup>

Regarding the United States/North Atlantic Treaty Organization intervention in Libya, Gov. Romney claimed the Obama administration had not been aggressive or unilateral enough in its use of force as the intervention began, but a month later he attacked the administration for seeking to overthrow former dictator Moammar Qaddafi rather than sticking to a limited civilian-protection mission.<sup>4</sup>

While Gov. Romney has not been as aggressive as his supporter Sen. John McCain (R-AZ) on Syria, he has called for arming and organizing opposition forces.<sup>5</sup> On Iraq and Afghanistan, Gov. Romney has left the impression he prefers indefinite American military involvement (see below).

Gov. Romney is strangely much more skittish about using force in Pakistan, and he is more solicitous of the Pakistani government than his general rhetoric toward force and unilateralism would indicate. In 2007 he opposed then-candidate Obama's commitment to capturing or killing Osama bin Laden if he were located in Pakistan,<sup>6</sup> and he opposed a hypothetical offensive against insurgent safe areas on the Pakistani border in a 2011 debate. He is supportive of drones on the grounds that the Pakistani government is "comfortable" with their use.<sup>7</sup>

Finally, Gov. Romney's campaign white paper favors an expansion of the post-9/11 authorization for the use of military force against Al Qaeda and the Taliban to include "any foreign terrorist entity that is waging war against the United States," creating potential for a much wider-ranging use of force against various terrorist groups whether or not they are aligned with Al Qaeda.<sup>8</sup>

## President Obama's position

President Obama argues that force is justified for self-defense and humanitarian intervention.<sup>9</sup> But he also recognizes that decisions to use force must be taken seriously and not cavalierly, and they should be appropriately limited to avoid unnecessary harm to both American interests and noncombatants.

The administration is aiming to bring the large-scale wars of the last decade to an end, withdrawing all U.S. troops from Iraq in 2011 and transitioning control of security in Afghanistan to Afghan forces by 2014.

At the same time, President Obama has been aggressive against Al Qaeda, launching record numbers of precise drone strikes against the terrorist group's safe havens in Pakistan and ordering the raid that killed Osama bin Laden.

In Libya, the Obama administration leveraged the United States' unique military capabilities (including precision strike, electronic warfare, and stealth technology) to enable allies such as France and the Great Britain to shoulder most of the burden of the intervention.

In short, President Obama has established a record of using limited, precise force to achieve U.S. objectives after careful deliberation and with allied support, rather than of rushing unilaterally into conflicts with large numbers of troops.

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## China

### Gov. Romney's position

Gov. Romney views China as a zero-sum competitor for global dominance, and the overall thrust of his China policy is military containment of an expansionist and coercive China.<sup>10</sup> This view of China buttresses Gov. Romney's advocacy for a higher defense budget, as does China's own increased defense spending.

On trade issues, Gov. Romney has trafficked in harsh rhetoric, saying he would designate China a currency manipulator "on day one" and "take appropriate counteraction."<sup>11</sup> He claims such actions would not start a trade war with Beijing because China does not want one.<sup>12</sup> In doing so he will commit the United States to a reckless course of confrontation with the world's second-largest economy on his first day in office before ever having met a Chinese leader or having adequately reviewed U.S.-China relations as a whole.

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## President Obama's position

President Obama has worked with China on issues of mutual interest while pushing back in areas of competition. For instance, the United States reassured Asian allies and partners in standing firm against assertive Chinese behavior in the South China Sea, and the U.S. military is shifting its focus and assets to the Asia-Pacific region.

At the same time, President Obama has engaged in tough diplomacy with Beijing on Iran to secure its support for the most comprehensive set of international sanctions yet imposed on Tehran as well as a decrease in Chinese oil imports from Iran.

On trade, the Obama administration has brought more major trade actions against China than any other administration. In July, it launched a complaint against Chinese duties on American-made cars in the World Trade Organization in July and won a challenge against Chinese tariffs on American steel products in June.<sup>13</sup> President Obama also established the first Trade Enforcement Center at the White House to hold countries like China accountable for their unfair trade practices.

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## Global economy

### Gov. Romney's position

Gov. Romney does not appear to have clear positions for the global economic crisis. His major international economic policy proposal is a super-sized free-trade zone named after President Ronald Reagan that appears to duplicate many of the functions of existing institutions like the World Trade Organization.<sup>14</sup>

In primary debates, Gov. Romney has forsworn attempts to help pull Europe out of its ongoing economic crisis, claiming "Europe is able to help Europe"<sup>15</sup> and the United States should not "go run over to Europe and try and save their banking system."<sup>16</sup> Glenn Hubbard, a Romney economic advisor, wrote an opinion article in a German newspaper attacking President Obama's pro-growth approach to Europe and calling for more austerity there.<sup>17</sup>

## President Obama's position

President Obama has encouraged cooperation among major economic players such as the G-8 and G-20 to overcome their collective economic problems. On Europe, the president has supported deeper European integration on budgets and banking policy as well as rescuing troubled banks. He has advocated prioritizing economic growth, in

opposition to austerity, as the best way to bring deficits under control and has called on European leaders to act swiftly to resolve the crisis.<sup>18</sup>

On trade, President Obama has signed three bilateral trade agreements into law (South Korea, Panama, and Colombia)<sup>19</sup> and has proposed the Trans-Pacific Partnership trade agreement with 10 other nations in that region.

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## Russia

### Gov. Romney's position

Gov. Romney views Russia through Cold War lenses, where Moscow is America's "number one geopolitical foe"<sup>20</sup> and any efforts to establish a working relationship with it are appeasement by definition and demonstrate weakness. He minimizes benefits accrued from current policy such as cooperation on Iran sanctions and arms deliveries or supply routes to Afghanistan, while resting opposition to the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty, or New START, on factually dubious grounds such as claiming intercontinental ballistic missiles can be mounted on bombers.<sup>21</sup> In addition, Gov. Romney has opposed finding a practical accommodation with Russia on missile defense, claiming doing so constitutes weakness.<sup>22</sup>

### President Obama's position

President Obama has sought cooperation with Russia on matters of mutual interest while opposing Moscow where it and the United States differ. Supply lines through Russia and the former Soviet Union have kept U.S. troops in Afghanistan stocked after the Pakistan government cut supply routes through its territory following the Osama bin Laden raid. The Obama administration's diplomacy with Russia secured the last round of U.N. sanctions on Iran as well as the cancellation of the sale of advanced air defense systems to Tehran.

New START puts more U.S. and Russian nuclear weapons out of commission and allows U.S. inspections of Moscow's nuclear arsenal. While President Obama shifted missile defense to a more technologically capable system, he has not abandoned it despite Russian objections. By the end of 2011, the United States had deployed Aegis missile defense ships to the Mediterranean and concluded agreements with Poland, Romania, Turkey, and Spain to host various elements of the new system.<sup>23</sup>

Finally, in Syria, the United States has attempted to bypass Russia's support for the Assad regime to end atrocities there.

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## Middle East

### Iraq

#### *Gov. Romney's position*

He would have kept 10,000–30,000 U.S. troops in Iraq for an unspecified period of time following the conclusion of the 2008 U.S.-Iraq security agreement at the end of 2011.<sup>24</sup>

#### *President Obama's position*

He withdrew U.S. troops completely from Iraq in accord with the U.S.-Iraq security agreement on December 17, 2011.

### Afghanistan

#### *Gov. Romney's position*

His position is unclear, Gov. Romney has repeatedly called President Obama's 2014 transition timeline "politically motivated" and pledged to review the transition upon taking office. But he has also supported the 2014 transition date.<sup>25</sup>

#### *President Obama's position*

He aims to wind down U.S. involvement by withdrawing U.S. troops and transitioning to Afghan responsibility for security by 2014.

### Iran

#### *Gov. Romney's position*

He takes a rhetorical hardline by threatening war if Iran does not give in to U.S. demands on its nuclear program. He proposes taking actions the United States is already taking, such as deploying aircraft carriers to the Persian Gulf and enhancing defense cooperation with Israel.<sup>26</sup>

#### *President Obama's position*

To the president, all options remain on the table, but he wants to pursue dual tracks of pressure via sanctions and negotiations to resolve Iran's nuclear question. He believes this is the best way to ensure Tehran does not develop nuclear weapons.

## Israel-Palestine

### *Gov. Romney's position*

He would abandon decades of U.S. policy of aiming to broker peace efforts between Israel, the Palestinians, and Arab states.<sup>27</sup>

### *President Obama's position*

He would continue facilitating a negotiated two-state solution while guaranteeing Israel's security via unprecedented defense cooperation.

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## Conclusion

As these major issues—the use of force, Russia, the global economy, China, and the Middle East—indicate, a wide gulf separates President Obama's efforts to manage America's critical role in an ever-more complex international system and Gov. Romney's vision of an America as a lone, aggressive bull in the international china shop. While President Obama seeks to build America's foreign policy future on a foundation of pragmatism and principle, Gov. Romney looks to double down on the failed foreign policy vision of former President George W. Bush and former Vice President Dick Cheney that led to a disastrous war in Iraq.

Americans will have a clear choice of foreign policies when they head to the ballot box in November.

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## Endnotes

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